

**Interview with Mohamed M. Jama
Confederation of the Somali Community in Minnesota**

Interviewed on June 21, 2004

Interviewed inside at the Brian Coyle Community Center

**for the Minnesota Historical Society
Somali Skyline Tower Oral History Project
Andy Wilhide, Project Director**

Interviewed by Andy Wilhide and Bibi Abdalla

Mohamed M. Jama - MJ
Andy Wilhide - AW
Bibi Abdalla - BA
Sumaya Yusuf - SY

BA: What's your name?

MJ: Mohamed M. Jama.

BA: Where do you work?

MJ: I work for Street Works [2222 Park Avenue South, Minneapolis], contracted through Pillsbury [United Communities].

BA: What do you do?

MJ: I'm a youth and a teen outreach worker.

BA: How long have you worked there?

MJ: This is my fifth year now.

AW: What do you do, what's the daily..?

MJ: Basically, I'm targeting youth who are at risk, who are away from school, who ran away from homes. I provide necessities to them, basic needs, and stuff like that.

AW: You've been doing that for five years?

MJ: For five years now.

AW: Did that program start when you...?

MJ: I was hooked up through AmeriCorps, when I got done doing my AmeriCorps, so Pillsbury seen that I had some assets in that field and they took a risk with me.

BA: How long have you lived in Minnesota?

MJ: From the early '90s, from 1992. Now, that is, what, fourteen years. Yes, fourteen years.

BA: Where else in Minnesota have you lived?

MJ: Only in Minneapolis most of my life. I have lived in St. Paul for quite a few years, three years I believe, of my life, West St. Paul.

AW: Where in Minneapolis have you lived?

MJ: On the south side, south Minneapolis.

BA: Where were you born?

MJ: I was born in a place called Nairobi, but I grew up in Somalia.

AW: Where is it? Where were you born?

MJ: Nairobi city in Kenya but I grew up in Somalia.

AW: Where in Somalia did you grow up?

MJ: [sounds like Hommer-way], Mogadishu, in the city.

BA: Which one do you speak? Do you speak more Swahili or more Somali?

MJ: I have different mother tongues. Can I say bilingual or multilingual?

BA: Yes.

MJ: Yes, multilingual. So, Somali, Swahili, English, Borana.

BA: [sounds like Buh-ron-ee] as in [Buh-rah-li]?

MJ: Borana.

BA: Okay.

AW: Bibi, can you speak Swahili?

BA: A little. I forgot. I came here in 1997, and didn't have nobody to talk to. I lived there since 1992 to 1997...1990, I think, yes, 1991, 1992. I'm not sure.

Why did you came to the United States?

MJ: That's interesting. Everybody that comes to this great land comes for different reasons. For me, I came to pursue my own happiness and to elevate my education, for higher education. That was the two main factors why I chose to be here, or my mother chose for me to be here.

BA: Can I ask you when you went back to Somalia... You say you were born in Kenya, right?

MJ: Right.

BA: When did you went back to Somalia?

MJ: I was a baby.

AW: How old were you when you came here?

MJ: I came to United States when I was just fourteen, makes me twenty-seven today. I was thirteen years old.

AW: Your mother sent you over here? Or she came with you?

MJ: She came with me. All my family is here: my mother, my siblings, all of them. I'm the oldest son in the family. I have older sisters. How many of us? And my grandmother. There was twelve of us.

AW: Wow. And you're all here?

MJ: We're all of us here, yes.

BA: Wow, you're lucky.

AW: And you're the oldest?

MJ: I'm the oldest son of my mother.

AW: The oldest child or just the oldest son?

MJ: The oldest son, yes.

AW: So you had to take care of...?

MJ: Uhhh...believe me.

[chuckles]

AW: That's what makes you so good at your job?

MJ: Oh, yes. [chuckles]

BA: Please tell us what the journey was like from Somalia to the U.S. and what obstacles did you face?

MJ: The journey was not easy. One day, you're over your house, the next you see yourself moving at the age of what, eight, nine. You're moving. You don't even know where you're going. Your father is not present. Your mother is the core of the family, and we see ourselves just moving to a different foreign country to me, to Kenya. The good thing was I was a citizen there, so coming to Kenya, I was not bothered a lot. We did not go to the refugee camps. We lived in a...because my family owned houses there, so, basically, we was welcomed.

But the journey to America was difficult. We had... How can I say this? We had to face a lot of challenges. We have to look upon ourselves as refugees.

[pause – a cell phone rings]

AW: Major faux pas. I'm so sorry, hold on.

[break in the interview]

MJ: Identifying ourselves as refugees was not something that we was ready for. Refugee means different things. So, for us, we had to accept that we *is* refugees fleeing away from our homes coming to Kenya with no money. Families over there, we did not know. The U. N. [United Nations] did not do a lot. People who are supposed to resettle or settle. The people that come there were not very... How can I say this? There was not a lot of help for people that came to the cities. Mainly the people that got the help was the one war camp, so we was the early Somali refugees in Kenya in the late 1980s, around 1987, 1988.

AW: That's when you left Somalia?

MJ: That's when we left Somalia.

AW: Why did your family leave Somalia then to go to Kenya?

MJ: How can I say this? The country was not stable. There was a fear of young males like me getting recruited to fight against...to be a part of the coup, that is a child soldier. I know you heard about those stories. That age you're thought to be grown men, the age eight, nine. As long as you know how to shoot, you are a good potential soldier. My mother did not want to see me end up like that and the rest of our family belief system was not a part of that cause or that fight or the revolution that was going on. So she had to find a safer place for her young people to grow up. That was one of her choice to make. Whoever had the money left Somalia. You know that.

BA: Left early.

MJ: Yes, left very early.

BA: What was your first impression of the U.S. when you first came here?

MJ: That was good. My father was a diplomat so, mostly, he used to tell stories. So for us, getting those stories, we used to take it real seriously. He traveled a lot around the world, you know, kind of going around political issues and stuff like that. So, coming here, it was not like a big change, but it was like the culture... Everything was different for me. But the lifestyle, I grew up in that lifestyle. We had a chauffer driving us to school and stuff like that. Coming here, waking up in the morning early, being in school for eight hours was another shocking experience. I was always used to going into school for four to six hours a day, even it's called [unclear], you know what I'm saying, in Somalia that was very hard. Coming here, the language barrier... English was limited to me at the time. Did I say the culture? Yes.

AW: What about the culture?

MJ: Our culture tend to be grounded; it grounds us. But, here, young people can be outspoken. They can challenge the authority figures. For me, as a young male at that time, I was like, oooh, that is not something that I was raised to do. Even today, I don't even know the color of my father's eyes. Here, I'm looking at a grown man talking to me expecting me to look at him like eye to an eye. It was like challenging him for his authority or whatever that was. That was one of the things. Culture wise... My culture is Islam. Somalis, they may say, "Oh, we have culture," or whatever, but my culture is Islam. Whatever Islam constitutes, that's my culture. Coming here, it's a free land where you can exercise whatever you believe, but, still, you have to do outreach to others. At the age of eight, where you start, at the age of six, seven where you become very involved in practicing your religion, when you're coming here, there is that gap, where the separation of state and religion. While we was in Somalia all of them were entwined together. You cannot be excused out of a class by saying, "Let me go into my prayer." They'll be like, "What's wrong with this boy here?" That was one of the things.

AW: What were some of the stories that your dad told you?

MJ: Some of the stories my dad told me was... "It is a very peaceful place," he told me, one, two, and, "You can become who you choose you want to become." He said, "Remember that

tomorrow is not promised to you. It's only promised to a fool. But you can make that tomorrow happen for yourself." The stories were a part of saying that mostly Americans are people who believe in bettering others.

[break in the interview]

MJ: What was the question again?

AW: The stories.

MJ: Oh, the stories. Sorry. The stories were funny stories. He used to tell me that you can go to America and you see people putting their keys underneath their—what is it, that walking thingy, the welcome mat, where people freely open their doors, where holidays are like the biggest things, where people are very friendly, very inviting. How can I say this? When someone is in need, there's people who are willing to give some of that deed back to that person in need. He told me, "You can be you. You don't have to hide yourself behind...oh, you believe in this and this? You can be you. You're a free man to exercise whatever you want to exercise there mentally." I cannot not get to most of his stories, because I was very young. It did not prepare me for the real America, though, you know.

AW: When you were on the plane coming over here, what were you thinking?

MJ: I was just thinking, honestly to tell you, I'm going to have by the age of fourteen, fifteen, enough cash in my pocket, beautiful car, big house, you know. Those were some of the stereotypes that we believed to see in most of the movies. And we was like that, "Hey, I'm going to that land. I'm going to be living that life." Those are some of the things that our Imam had at that time. Man, I'm going to the USA where I can have enough cash, beautiful cars, and houses. That was in my head.

AW: It would just fall in your lap?

MJ: Yes, it just comes to you. Just stereotypical, so...

BA: What were some of the expectations of Minnesota and what is Minnesota really like?

MJ: "Minnesota nice," they say. My family, Minnesota, we had a lot of people that welcomed us at that time. We was well welcomed.

AW: Was Minnesota the first place you went to?

MJ: Minnesota was the first place I came to!

AW: So this is all that you've been to?

MJ: Have been here; never been away from it. I love it. Minnesota, for me, I never seen snow, you know. I have never been in cold weather like that, but coming here, I have to adjust to wearing a T-shirt, a shirt, pullover—that's a sweater—and a jacket, and big gum boots. Do you know what gum boots are? Like these huge...that was one of the things. That felt very heavy. I've never been sick in my life, but I started picking up... What is it? You have a cold and you go into a warm room... I wondered, you know. The heat and stuff like that, that kind of get to me. Minnesota is beautiful, a beautiful place, and I got to love the weather. The people are nice. My expectation of Minnesota when I first came here, I was expecting not to be like, I was expecting it was a place just like New York City, the glitters and the lights, and stuff like that. But I came to a real, real, real dairy land, the heart of the states. That is real hard workers, farmers.

AW: Where is it now?

MJ: In Minnesota, you know.

AW: Did you come to Minneapolis first?

MJ: Minneapolis. No where else.

AW: No farmers are in Minneapolis.

MJ: That's what I am saying.

AW: They're right outside.

[laughter]

MJ: Thirty minutes drive, you know, you can get to big farms. When I got here in Minnesota, Minneapolis was not that big. Minneapolis has got big in the last five years, right, big buildings, and stuff like that. So it was very open spaces. Driving from the airport coming to the house the Lutheran church gave to us, I was like, dang, this is not what I seen in the movies. No. There's open spaces, big views, you know. Coming to the house is like very little tiny square feet. I was expecting something big. This was one of the things.

Minnesota, educational-wise, it gave me tools that I can survive. Education-wise, it was very good. Living in Minnesota in the early 1990s was not bad. I believe that at the time most of blue collar workers in this state were financially well than the rest of the states. Unemployment was not something that...people did not find. I remember when we got here, my mother straight up went to work after a month, making good money, at the time. What is it? The food stamp program? The financial assistance was not something that is livable, so you had a choice of maybe three hundred dollars or go make to twenty-five hundred monthly. So she chose to go with that twenty-five hundred dollar monthly and that helped a lot.

AW: Was her English pretty good?

MJ: Yes. My mother was not that educated, but kind of a second grade educated, to a second grade level, English level, where she can communicate. She was not very a professional woman, but she had some skills that she could use at that time. That skills helped her. The first job she ever got was a bank teller. I'm like, wow.

BA: What have been some obstacles or hardships you have faced while adjusting to life in America?

MJ: A funny thing is when I was going through my orientation, I was told never to mess with African Americans. The cool thing is when I came to the neighborhood, the first people I see was African Americans. [chuckles] So I had to adjust to that. I was a young man, I had to adjust to getting that feedback, the negative type.

When I came here, one of the things, I had to adjust to the language. Come on, in real life, we may speak layman or comparative English, but when you're in the neighborhood, out of school, there's a different way of communication. People speak differently. They say different things that your English teacher don't normally tell you. Know what I'm saying? I had to adjust to that type of language barriers.

AW: Like slang, you mean?

MJ: Slang, comparative English, layman.

I had to adjust to way of style in dressing. I had to adjust to the food. It was very hard for me to digest most of the food here.

AW: Like what?

MJ: Most of the food.

AW: Like pizza or...?

MJ: Pizza was like...whoa! [chuckles]

I picked up a lot of weight. That was some of the things my mother watched out. We call it halal food. At the time, there was not a lot of halal places. She had to read and make sure that these are the food that we wanted, these are the stuff that we wanted. We end up just eating very small, so we can adjust our weights.

The other thing was the way of dressing and the environment that I was thrown in with no educational—how can I say this?—with no one actually telling you about the environment you was in. Here we found, we made mistakes. Okay. There's nobody there. We are expected to just leave, to start living. The environment was a big change for me.

AW: Your support network...

MJ: There was no support network or resettlement. How can I say this? I know, right now in the Great Lakes [Region], we have agencies where they resettle refugees when they come here, where for like six, eight months, they will have someone show them how to go shopping, the roads, how to take buses, how to get to school, what channels to watch for the weather, and stuff like that. We didn't have none of that. That was the other thing.

AW: How many Somali were here when you first came?

MJ: When I got here, there was few. There was few families. Most of the families lived in St. Paul. There was two, three families in St. Paul, two families in Rochester. That was the only people that we knew. We Somalis are so quick in finding ourselves.

AW: Why did you come to Minneapolis first? Or, you were in St. Paul first?

MJ: Minneapolis.

AW: You were in this neighborhood, Cedar Riverside?

MJ: I spend most of my years in Cedar Riverside. I *loved* growing up in this neighborhood. At the time, it was cool. I remember the Chase House, it used to have that sitting room and TV, very beautiful when you come to the lobby and stuff like that.

BA: How did you overcome your obstacles?

MJ: My mother was a positive person in my life. She educated us. She tried to find a lot of ways to make sure that every question that we had there was not an answer but a way to ease our way of thinking, by having a lot of people that came from different places to come and just see. Like there was a lot of churches that were interested in people like us. Basically, the people that sponsored us were mainly Lutheran churches.

AW: Is that the Lutheran Social Services?

MJ: Yes, the social services. It was odd to see people that came here and there was no public assistance. We didn't take public assistance. These churches, I don't know how they find, but they came to find us, and that was a way of having kind of a mentorship but someone to guide our family, by telling them, "For young people we go on soccer practices. If we need books, it's there," things like that, agencies like that.

AW: What were some of other obstacles? The fashion?

MJ: The fashion and the environment. Oh, my God!

[laughter]

The fashion. I came here straight up—how can I say this—preppie boy, you know? I had to make sure my black shoes are polished. I'm wearing nice little pipe pants. My shirt is tucked in, a tie, kind of a gentleman, you know. That had to quickly change. The schools were like the coolest place to be around. But you see kids wearing, at the time, two, three hundred dollar clothing, you wearing some nice Payless shoes... It's good. There was nothing wrong with it. But when I came to pick up my... Months and months went by, I started seeing myself different from most of the kids in the classes in school, because I was dressing differently. That was one.

Two was the environment. When you come from school, I remember Minnesota was the state capital... What is it that they call this once? Murderapolis, is it?

AW: Murderapolis?

MJ: Yes. That was the early 1990s, 1994, 1995. There was a lot of gang issues here. You had to watch out the way you dressed. I lived in one of the rowdiest neighborhoods. It was at Fourth [Street] and Thirty-Sixth [Avenue South]. There was a lot of gang-banging going on over there. So you had to watch out the way you dress. You have to pick up friends and you have to prove yourself going to school, from school, going shopping, from shopping, to shopping, even being out of the yard in your house. Young people will put you on a test. So that was the other thing. Drugs is around. That came later in my life, where those kind of things got to me. I was a young man. I did not care about how I dressed, because I always looked cool.

[chuckles]

AW: Were you placed in, because you were the oldest of all the kids...? Did your mom depend on you to set the example?

MJ: Examples? A lot. I had older sisters who I looked up to, but mostly they did what they needed to do and just look at me how I'm going to carry myself. I believe I carried myself in a fashionable manner, but they had to see the kind of language that I use, what I wear. There was a set time table for us to follow. If I'm following a time table, the rest of the young people, all my brothers and sisters, can follow that.

BA: What have been some successes, positive things, since you have lived here?

MJ: A lot! A lot of things very successful.

School, very positive. I was never a quick learner. I was a C student, so school was not very interesting, but I always looked forward going to class in the morning because of one thing: playing soccer. I find myself escaping all my problems, issues, that I had just playing football. We call it football. I went to United States quarter finals a couple of times in high school.

AW: Where did you go to high school?

MJ: I went to high school in Southwest High School [Minneapolis]. But I started my high school career from Roosevelt, my ninth grade. I went to Southwest for the rest of my four years left. Soccer was one of the most positive things that have been to me and it changed me. So, that.

And, of course, working with AmeriCorps and being involved in my community.

AW: What did you do with AmeriCorps?

MJ: In my peak, I don't know if it was the AmeriCorps logo, "Getting things done." Yes, "Getting things done." I've got it on my T-shirt still, "Getting things done." Now, the population of my people is great in this sector of the city. So I can kind of give hours where I give seventeen hundred hours, very minimum pay, and I can, basically, change some lives—not change but kind of see if I can be a part of that life that can be seen and people can say, "Oh, he's doing positive." That was one. I learned a lot from being in AmeriCorps. They give us a lot of different training on different issues and diversity that I never had. It prepared me for how to deal with young people and how to deal with myself.

SY: How did you first find out about AmeriCorps?

MJ: I was in Minnesota before Brian Coyle [Community Center] was built. I used to run around here playing soccer. So when this was done, Pillsbury became a... How can I say this? Pillsbury housed AmeriCorps in this building. I went through all the programming in this center called Brian Coyle. I went through my youth programmings here, teen programmings here. I happen to be an employee here today. By just going through the youth programs at Brian Coyle will allow you to see different advantages or different programs that are available to us here, like FANS. I went through a program called Jumpstart, Satellite, FANS. AmeriCorps was the next step, a way to generate some kind of scholarships where you can pay for your school. That was the man goal that I looked into at AmeriCorps.

AW: Let's talk a little bit about growing up here in the Brian Coyle Center. What were the people like here? What were the kids like, the backgrounds?

MJ: The backgrounds was very diverse. In the early 1990s it was very diverse. We had good programs. We still do have great programs in here. But Brian Coyle in my eyes changed from being that Brian Coyle in the early 1990s and becoming very educated and having a lot of people who are interested in my culture, my people, and [unclear] towards how to bring those young people...making it safe and educational place for them. That was something that Brian Coyle changed. It changes with the people. It changes with the neighborhood. The more of my people came to this neighborhood, the more these programs became very friendly and opening to young people. That was one of the things. But growing up around Brian Coyle was a way to escape a lot of things in the streets. So it was a very safe and a very positive place for me to be around and to be at.

AW: You say it was so diverse. Name some countries or backgrounds...

MJ: Oh, man, you're not going to believe how many types of people we had in here. We had Norwegians. We had Somalis. We had Ethiopians. We had Vietnamese, Koreans in our programs at that time...Thailand and Tibet. We had some cool Swedish people. Jones, I knew a little boy from England, so it was cool. It was very diverse here.

AW: Very international?

MJ: Very international, very diverse. African Americans and Minnesotans.

AW: You said something about when you came to orientation... They said, "Don't get into anything with African Americans." They gave you a warning or something, about a stereotype?

MJ: It's kind of a stereotype, but I don't know why. Is it me or people just make that up. I know I heard that. I don't know why. I do not know why. I'm still figuring out why. The funny thing is the neighborhood, when I come look around, there's nothing but African Americans. Saying, "Okay, how can I stay away now?"

AW: Did you get any kind of negative stereotypes when you were in Kenya?

MJ: Yes. Believe me, coming to America, me as a black man, I was running away from my own black men where I'm supposed to be. Okay, you struggled. Okay, I'm in that struggle now. How can I keep on struggling instead of just saying, "Oh, I'm in America where everything is beautiful. I can sleep, eat, do whatever I want to do, forget about the struggle that is waiting for me." That was something that I was not prepared... where I can talk to people and they say this, this, this. Just kind of educate me in a different way. My mother was not prejudiced, so she allowed us to give every human a fair chance, of allowing ourselves to get different opinions. Because people live differently in this life. That was the other thing that was cool.

AW: Did you have many African American friends when you were growing up?

MJ: Yes. A couple of my co-workers now, I went to school with. Yes. I had not a lot. I had two of my real, real, real, real people I grew up with, Mujahideen, and my man... What's his name?

AW: [chuckles] My man.

MJ: Jamal. That was the two brothers. I have some Caucasian friends. I love my Caucasian friends because of the soccer tournaments and stuff like that. I got to meet *real* cool people: Paul, Shawn, Timothy, Tom. They was real cool people.

AW: Do you still keep in touch with them?

MJ: We still do keep in touch. They actually came to my wedding.

AW: Oh, I'll ask you about that.

MJ: That was cool. A couple of my best men were, so that's cool.

BA: What do you tell your family and friends in Kenya and Somalia about America?

MJ: America right now as a grown man? A lot of things. I tell them, "Hey, you work for your dollar here. You don't just wait." Like I said when I was coming here, cash money, and beautiful cars and houses, ain't nothing like that. You work for every little penny you get. There's a great saying: A penny earned, is a penny worth made." Basically, I translate that in different ways that they can get that into their heads.

BA: If your family or friends were to come here, what would you tell them about Minnesota?

MJ: About Minnesota... "Minnesota had been willing and now is more into empowering Somalis, so come on with it. Bring yourself and everybody that you can. Come and be a part of a dream."

AW: Do you have a lot of cousins and stuff back in Somalia and Kenya?

MJ: Yes.

AW: I know your immediate family is all here.

MJ: Yes, my extended family. I came from a big extended family. I have cousins who are still working hard to get here so they can get a little piece of a dream, you know. I have contacted them.

BA: Do you plan on returning to Somalia? Why or why not?

MJ: On one condition: when I hear one day they're writing parking tickets, then I will go back.

[chuckles]

SY: So interesting.

AW: Why is that?

MJ: For my safety. It's a no-man's land there. So I don't want to get in too deeply on that, but parking tickets I hear? I'm going there.

[laughter]

BA: Have you ever went back to Kenya?

MJ: No, I have not.

BA: Do you plan to?

MJ: My plan is to be financially sufficient before I would make any trips.

BA: Do you consider Minnesota or the U.S. to be your home?

MJ: Now, yes. It is my home. Yes.

BA: Why?

MJ: Why? Oh, come on, I was given an opportunity where I can better myself and have a better life, believing what I want to believe in. No one interferes with me. *It's my home.* I'm planning on buying a house! Minnesota and the U.S. is my home. I was very welcomed, and they allow me to have different opportunities.

BA: Do you think of your story as a part of Minnesota history?

MJ: Yes. Minnesota has an immigrant history, so I'm a part of that flow of immigrants in here.

AW: Do you think that Somalis will stay?

MJ: I know I will stay for long, yes. I'm not a different generation of Somalis, but we already have in my family... My sister already give birth, the old sort of first generation of Somalis in this state. So, hopefully, by the time I'm thirty-five, I'm going to have nephews and nieces who are the second generation of Somalis here. We're here for a long, long time, and we're here to be deep rooted in this culture and this society.

BA: What are the three most important parts of Somali culture?

MJ: Somali culture?

AW: Or what it means to be Somali.

MJ: What it means for me to be Somali? That's interesting, what it means for me to be Somali. Preserving myself by carrying my own culture through my name. That's one. Two is, for me, when you say culture to me as a Muslim, my culture is Islam, so I don't know what Somali culture is. If you ask me culture, my culture is my religion. But if you ask me for my traditions, that will be different. My woman are my tradition. Our women are my tradition. Our way of living is my tradition. I believe that every person has a different way of living and a different system of living. So that if that is my culture... The growth and population of Somalis is my culture.

SY: What did you mean by "our women?"

MJ: Our women, yes. Without our women, our population would be lesser. By just saying, “Young Somali women,” or “Women Somalis”... How can I say this? Maybe in educational way. By just having our women preserving themselves where they carry themselves as young Somali, the way they’re supposed to carry themselves as Muslims, that is our culture itself. [unclear] That’s a good system.

[laughter]

AW: So you kind of see women as holding onto...

MJ: To every essential of being Somali. When you look at them, you say, “That’s Somali sister.”

SY: Is it because they bear our children?

MJ: That’s one, because that’s the growth of the population, you know.

AW: What about looks, like wearing a headscarf or hijab?

MJ: I don’t mind as long as she has the [sounds like hall-eem-oh-uh-noon-oh fah-du-moh-nay] and I can tell when she walks. We call it *laafyood*. She’s turning her hands to the sides. That’s my culture, you know.

[chuckles]

It’s not really me [unclear] brothers.

AW: Okay.

BA: What are the most important things that make Somali culture unique?

AW: Or you can talk about traditions or Islam.

MJ: Very unique? You know, we are like eight to eleven million people in this world, very small number, but has one religion, one culture, come from one land. That’s *very* unique to me, and we happen to have our own state. God! Where can you go in this world and find one hundred percent pure of those three things?—except Greece, I believe. That should tell you a lot, a lot of things.

BA: What are some ways that Somalis in Minnesota are losing their cultural and traditions?

MJ: We are educated more. Do you guys drive? Have you seen those posters on some of the freeways where those Somali sisters in the middle of all this [sounds like nim-coh-air]. Those kind of education tools: fighting prejudices, that’s one; telling them that we are here to be

entrepreneurs—that is true—not just freeloaders but entrepreneurs; and by having a good name in our society.

BA: I just wanted to rephrase the question once more. How are Somalis losing their culture? Losing.

AW: Losing. Like you see teenagers, as now, kind of in between that first and second generation. Some came here when they were seven or eight but now, they're into high school. Do you feel like you picked up some things about American culture and lost some things about Somali culture? Maybe this could be about language or certain traditions like you see in weddings or other stuff.

MJ: Okay. This is cool. I grew up, you know, being cool or whatever here, whatever you want to call it.

[laughter]

For me, right now, I can't go to my generation, older type people, and say, "Yo! What's cracking?" They'll look at me like, uhhh, what's wrong this brother here? But when my little brother who is the age of seventeen, eighteen now, he can just step up to me and say, "Yo! What's cracking? What's happening?" They will be like, "What's wrong with this," but for him, that's not wrong. For him that environment allows him to be...where we still have that. For them, it's like they lost their decency. He can argue with his mother. When she says, "Hey, go fix up your bed." "I'm going to do it when I feel like it." That would be getting to my nerves, getting into my skin. I'd be like I'd just want to do something crazy. That's one. Losing culture... Most of our young people are not losing culture, but they entwining with the culture, you know. My little sister, the youngest in the family, told me, "My first day in Kindergarten, I seen a lot of kids skipping, so I just started skipping with them." Know what I'm saying? That's how the feelings of our teenagers is going into, not losing but into that culture, yes, positive things about that culture. We can define those cultures. That culture is called hip-hop. It's a different culture. There's a lot of positive things about it; there's a *lot* of negative things about it. It's not balanced.

SY: What are the negatives things?

MJ: A lot of negative things in hip-hop. Hip-hop music right now, ninety percent of it is generated into commercial-type music where calling females the "B" word, "H" word is cool. Where if you really want to be a man, wear this big chain for a few hundred thousand dollars. Sagging and being bad boys is like the coolest thing. Being a thug is cool. The positive of hip-hop is there still. The positive of hip-hop is where we urban kids came up with our own little culture. Know what I'm saying? We can just look at ourselves and say, "Okay, we're not rebels, but this is how we live." The negative is a mounting, everyday.

BA: How do you feel about the Somali teens womanizing the Somali woman these days, especially the teens that are coming up right now, seventeen, eighteen years old. Calling her, for

example when she refuses to sleep with him or something like that, “Ho,” and this and that? How do you feel about that whole thing as a youth worker? Do you actually try to talk to them into stuff like that, because in the Somali culture, we’re not supposed to give ourselves to men until marriage, you know?

MJ: Correct.

BA: Can you talk about that a little bit?

MJ: That is interesting. First, what I say is it starts from home what the young man hears. We all know, all young boys at the age of eight to nine, they can use *foul* language. They use so foul language. That is a part of being, you know, a boy growing up. We see it [unclear], and they’ll grow up saying that foul language. But if you have a real grounded parents where they check the language, like, “Yo! Not in my house, little boy. I’m paying for that food you eat. You think you’re big. You think you’re smart. I’m educated. I used to rock you and tell you stories.” If we still have that, we can educate the young people. As I say, the hip-hop culture has a few percentage to be blamed on how our young people see themselves. Mostly for females, hip-hop culture disregards the hate for females. Now, come on, get real, most of the music that we hear is one-sided. We make females obvious, you know, where there’s no balance in there. Good music is a good music where a man just thinks about that female. She’s that, she’s that, is that. Seeing our young people disrespecting our young females...most of the things like that, I went through that period where I thought it was cool to just to talk to a sister, “What’s happening? It’s cool.” She gives you a number, it’s cool, but I never took it to that extreme where I have to go and, hopefully, get lucky with her. Now, our young people growing up fast. Maybe the lack of having a male role model in their life, that sense. Every young male that has something to say about female is a male that never had any strong male support in his household.

BA: Do you think that all of that is caused by the hip-hop, the music and the stuff that they see or TV, or do you think that it’s caused by us, our culture, Somalis thinking by the time the boy is fifteen, we need to give them freedom, that he’s actually mature now, that he’s responsible to think for himself, and we give him a lot of freedom. Do you think it’s caused by that or do you think it’s caused by the TV and the hip-hop?

MJ: Both. Both. Fifteen is a little boy, still. We may think, oh, he can go. Maybe he’ll be working at McDonalds for a few hundred hours and he thinks, “I’m making money. I’m a grown man.” Listening to—I cannot pronounce it properly—censored kind of music. They’re supposed to check. That music goes to your house. The parents supposed to check that music. By being fifteen and Somali, believe me, I seen a lot. They tend to listen to any hard core hip-hop. You know, hard core hip-hop is not something simple. It’s not something that most of the people will want to listen to. It’s very raw, degrade women, generally. Listening to that kind of music, that will do something to your way of thinking, thinking like, oh, if that man makes millions saying this... You know what I’m saying? Why not me? Maybe our sister digs people like that. Not all on young males; all females play roles, too, in it, you know, in simple roles. I do not know what those roles are but there’s roles that they’re playing where they are maybe obliged towards allowing those kinds of languages used.

AW: Do you have any more follow up questions? The question about Somali music...do you see many teens continuing to listen to Somali music on their own, not just at weddings?

MJ: I *hated* Somali music myself. As a person. I hated it, Somali language and Somali music. A cool brother just came out and blew some cool beats, you know, just changed the vibe, and even the movements to the music. I was, like, this is crazy. Now, most of my generation, of my people, what we're doing is Somalis are the poets, the best writers. That I believe. If you can just listen to the song, you'll be like how did they come up with this stuff? But, having young people that are venturing towards their career where they take their language and make it simpler, make a song that you can move to, not too much thinking. Somali [unclear] today, you know, like a lot of... How can I say this?

SY: Poetry?

MJ: Poetry in our songs. What the young people is doing into an album [unclear] with cool beats, they're making that language easy for people like us to kind of feel it a little bit and say, "Hey!" Somali music is all about love, struggle, and revolution. Cool.

AW: Can you name some people, some artists, musicians?

MJ: Somalis...my favorite artist of all time, *all time*, is still alive Somali. Young people that are growing up or the old ones... We have some old schoolers still from the early 1950s: Hassan Adan, Fadumo Mohamed, Egal. We still have some old school people, but we have these young people that is coming up and taking old music, making it into cool breeze move. I have a good friend, friend of friends, K'naan, good musician, [unclear] band, awesome. They're trying to put that Somali music out there to most of the world. This famous lady—I forgot her name...

BA: Maryam Mursal?

MJ: Maryam Mursal, oh, God, she's great. She's the old schooler, but changing into this new hip-type movement.

AW: Is there musicians in Somalia or here?

MJ: Here. Most of our old school musicians come to the state, yes. Minnesota, we have the most population in the states.

BA: Do they come here or are they from Minnesota?

MJ: Some of them are residents here. Most of them just come here for the concerts.

You guys know that on June 27 [2004]... I'll call you early so, hopefully, you will come and have fun and enjoy your Independence [Day].

[pause]

BA: What opportunities do Somali teens encounter in the U.S.?

MJ: Opportunities?

BA: Yes.

MJ: A lot of opportunities. I did not imagine myself... I always was told, "Be a doctor. Be a lawyer." I never had that brain. But I seen something that I can always do. Most of our teens we have now, young people like me that grew up here now, can be the mentors. When we was growing up in the state, we never had those mentors. My mentor was a cool lady called Linda. She helped a lot.

AW: Linda Bryant?

MJ: Linda Bryant, yes. She's cool people. She was the director for the Center. She put me on check, you know. Now, we have a lot of opportunities where there's a lot of schools. We have a couple of schools that we have some Somali deans, Macalester, U of M [University of Minnesota], Hamline. We have good Somali educated people in there where they are reaching to their own core of peers and saying, "Yo, my population here..." By seeing them in that level is allowing those schools a little bit of relaxing to their traditions, meaning rules, you know, by allowing us to fetch in there and go see what path of life we want to choose as careers maybe.

BA: Do you think Somalis teens are losing their culture? If so, how?

MJ: Losing their culture, yes, kind of. We already answered that, right?

BA: Yes.

[chuckles]

BA: What obstacles or hardships do Somalis teens encounter in the U.S.?

MJ: A lot of obstacles. Last night... There's a place that we always go to where we can express ourselves, listen to poetry, and stuff like that. The thing for it yesterday was a friend of mine just came and started talking about his life in the U.S. He's coming from the refugee camps, feeling all good coming to an environment where it did not allow people like him to flourish when he goes school. He's that first kid sitting in the first row in the first desk next to the instructor or the teacher. He want to get everything, but his English is limited. The rest of the class is like, "Oh, whatever," that kind of thinking, where he feels like very different from the school. But in months to go by, he sees himself just changing slowly, being a part of that room or that class. Before where you can come in and automatically pick up...I can tell this man here, not from here. You know? But a few months to go, you can't even tell that was that brother that came

from Somalia, from the refugee camp months ago. He started loosing up his pants, putting it low.

I have a story. I don't know if we have enough time?

AW: Oh, yes.

MJ: What he said was by having himself kind of entwined and having a generation of Somalis that came before him five, ten years ago, by seeing them when they come to school, they're just hip-hop cool, by seeing where there's like five, ten of them, no one messes with them. By yourself, the language barrier is there and if you try to go to the lunch or whatever, there's people that will be picking up on you. You're having to go into fights and stuff like that and protect yourself coming from school, going to school, like I said on the buses. People will step up to you, will challenge you. By having those groups, by meeting those brothers, just saying, "What's up, Somali. What's up Hassan." Maybe that is not something good for him. The rest of the people who see, "Oh, those are gang-bangers. Looks like gangs." When they go for lunch, they go to lunch all of them. The environment don't allow the individuality, for us to be individuals. The environment just wants us to be a part of what society creates out of those people.

AW: That's what all teenagers face?

MJ: All teenagers face a lot of issues and a lot of struggle.

AW: Group identity, and your own. It's really hard to be your own.

MJ: Right. What is it? A kind of family outreach type thingy in this center, in Brian Coyle, where they had a panel of teachers, social workers. No, maybe high school teachers? What was it? A guy, a Kindergarten type, telling people some stuff. I'm a youth worker here, you know. I have the experience. The agenda was about youth. We're having high school teachers talking about problems of youth and how can we solve problems of youth? I felt like that was not their field. They should have youth workers, people who are good in that type of field, to be a part of that panel. Now, we have those type of people where we can just step up a notch and say, "Oh, I'm in this path, I can do something about this topic."

AW: Is there anything else, ladies?

BA: What advice do you give to Somali teens to adjust to the life in America?

MJ: None of them come asking for advices. Nobody. None of them.

[laughter]

There's no advice I can give. I can just say, "Be yourself. Allow your individuality. High school is where you learn and you learn yourself. Try to look in the mirror and see who you

really is, because that mirror will not lie to you. It will tell you straight up who you is. You may just give people these different personalities, but when you come and stand in front of that mirror, you can't escape who you see just being yourself."

[break in interview]

AW: It's good to see you so happy.

[laughter]

AW: You said something about buying a house. Are you going to be moving then?

MJ: Right now, the percent, what is it, the interest rate? Five point seven? That's the lowest it can get, so I'm going to take advantage of that. Yes, I'm hoping to take advantage of that. But the property values is killing me, so I'm hoping to save up some more.

AW: Where would you move? Would you stay in Minneapolis?

MJ: In Minneapolis. Yes, yes. We hoping to have the next mayor elect to be a Somali one day.

AW: Yes?

MJ: Yes.

AW: Is that going to be you?

MJ: Nooo, I'm not a politician. No.

[chuckles]

MJ: We're giving it, let's just say, ten more years. We will have some political agendas where *we* come up, you know, to the stage and say, "This is our issues." Twelve percent of the voters are Somalis now, so that is a huge percentage.

SY: Wow. I didn't even know that.

AW: In Minneapolis?

MJ: In Minneapolis, yes. We just had our first caucus here. We have a caucus, a DFL caucus. It was a huge turnout.

AW: How many people?

MJ: A lot of people. We did our own fundraising. That was the coolest thing. We're not just freeloaders. We did our own fundraising when [John] Kerry was here a couple weeks ago. We contributed.

AW: Did you get to meet Kerry then?

MJ: Yes, I had a 50 dollar plate. It was cool.

AW: Now, it's election time, almost. This summer are you planning to get involved in getting people to vote and how are you going to get involved with the election, if at all?

MJ: Ummm...

AW: If Somalis are twelve percent of the vote, how many of them actually vote, though?

MJ: That is one thing. Most of the holders of the city, leadership holders, are the older generation. So we have a lot of work to kind of tell them, "Yo, let's get involved." When those are involved, younger people, people like me can be involved. Most of the city's leadership holders are our elders. So the elders necessarily don't like voting on most of the agendas right now. But, still, their vote counts. Whoever we feel like putting somewhere, so if that don't work out, a list. We give our voice out and our person want to hear our opinions. That's the only way. That's the Constitution to America. It's the way you can secure your way of living in this state, and that is the way that *we* can secure ourselves to become very productive people.

AW: Very interesting.

[End of the interview]

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